

Mardi Gras 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

February 26, 2022

John 8:1-11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

I've been wanting to preach this sermon for a long time. I've actually been a pastor for 25 years. And preaching for even longer. But I've never preached this gospel passage. The story of the woman caught in adultery. I remember it from my childhood. One of the best stories of the Bible. Or is it?

Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. Or maybe you've heard more old fashioned language: *Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.* Or this expression: *Go and sin no more.* It's a Bible passage that has some memorable phrases. But in my modern-day Bible, and surely in yours, this story has brackets around it. Double-squared brackets. The brackets indicate a problem. And the problem is that this story was not part of the original Gospel According to John. The brackets are a signal that this story perhaps does not belong in John. The oldest copies of John don't have the story of the woman caught in adultery. In all of our surviving copies of the Bible and fragments of the Bible, we can see that this was inserted into some copies of John starting in the 400s. And that, my friends, is a big problem. John's gospel exists in two forms, each with multiple copies, one with, and one without, the woman's story. The oldest copies lack the story. It was clearly added later. And so in most modern versions of the Bible, it will be in double-square brackets. And/or have footnotes. Which indicate that these eleven or twelve verses are dubious. It isn't what the original author intended.

Now this story was not included in the Sunday lectionary. Which is why I've never preached on it in more than a quarter century of preaching. It's never assigned for reading in worship. The Roman Catholic church has included it in their lectionary, and they will go to mass on April 3 this year and their priests will read it to them. And perhaps preach on it. But no other mainline denomination will include it. It's actually unusual for mainline Protestant churches to differ so noticeably from the Catholic church. On all of the other Sundays in Lent this year, the mainline Protestants and the Catholics have the same gospel readings. But not on April 3. I cannot be certain, but I deduce that the difference concerns the very serious questions about this story, specifically the inconsistencies around its inclusion in the Bible in general, and in the Gospel According to John, in particular.

Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. I've loved this story since I was a child. But today I wanted to preach a sermon about why the study of the Bible matters. And this is a superb

example. The Bible did not parachute down from heaven last week as one, single unified, homogeneous creation. People who study the Bible know this. But ordinary people do not. Back in the fifties and sixties, there was a general interest magazine called Look. It was like Life magazine or The Saturday Evening Post. It was a popular American publication. And seventy years ago this week, in the Look magazine edition of February 26, 1952, a highly successful journalist named Hartzell Spence published an article entitled, “The Truth About the Bible.” And he talked about what he called the 50,000 errors in the Bible. Now Spence was a sensationalist journalist, and is commonly credited as the creator of the pinup which traveled with American soldiers and sailors during World War II. But when Spence told the readership of Look magazine that there are 50,000 errors in the Bible, he created a lot of problems, especially for church leaders. Clergy and church leaders know that the Bible did not parachute down from heaven as one, single unified homogeneous creation. But ordinary Christians may not know that. Which is one reason that I feel good Bible study is so important. Because the Bible is a trustworthy witness to the truth. But it came into existence through many centuries, and just how it is formed and shaped and translated and published has always been discussed and debated. And often there is a consensus, but sometimes we have two or more witnesses, two or more versions, telling us different things.

Our gospel reading this morning is telling us some remarkable things about Jesus. It tells us that he stands against hypocrisy. And it tells us that he does not condemn sinners. We may hear him speaking to us when he says, “*Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.*” The story also tells us that Jesus is wise, even sly, in dealing with those who seek to entrap him. It tells us that in the face of public social pressure, he is a stand-up guy. I told you that I have liked this story since childhood. It is more important to me than the story where Jesus walks on water, or where he turns water into wine, or even the assigned gospel reading for today, which is the Transfiguration. The story of the woman caught in adultery resembles something that happens in my world. In my life. So this story of Jesus speaks more truth to me than some of the other stories, stories which don’t seem like they would ever really happen in my world or in my life.

So I treasure this story. I don’t believe that this story was originally part of John’s gospel. There are so many reasons why that is unlikely. (The double squared brackets.) Someone stuck it into the fourth gospel, a bit awkwardly. There are a few cases of it turning up in other places, usually in Luke’s gospel. So it has been crammed into the jigsaw puzzle in the wrong place, but that does not mean that it isn’t true. The real mystery is where this story came from, and who found it, and why they stuck it into the eighth chapter of John’s gospel.

That may sound really presumptuous to us, that someone would do this. But Christianity came into existence before books existed. Important writings would have been in the form of scrolls. And paper itself was a valuable commodity, and some of the oldest fragments of the New Testament were written over with things like business receipt. Somebody was recycling a valuable piece of papyrus— that’s what paper was— and they wrote down a business receipt on a scrap, Not knowing that two thousand years later, their business receipt was written on top of

what would ultimately become the oldest surviving copy of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Things like that have happened. Our idea of a book— the word “Bible” means “book”— would have been completely alien to someone like Paul or to the author of Revelation or to Mark the gospel-writer. Nothing of the kind existed. But it soon would. The story of the woman caught in adultery likely was floating around as an unattached scrap.

[Hold up Bible] This is a Bible, as we now have it. [Hold up a lectionary] This is a lectionary, selections from the Bible that are used in worship. The Bible is “complete.” This lectionary is just selections, a fraction of the Bible, with excised readings that are all out of context and out of sequence chosen and arranged according to the needs of theology or liturgy. I always imagine that the lectionary is derived from the Bible. I preach that way almost every week.

But in fact, in some cases, lectionaries existed before what we now call the Bible. Because Christian worship existed before the Bible. Keep in mind that the first Christians would have treated Genesis or Isaiah as sacred scripture, but they would not have treated Paul's letter to the Corinthians as sacred scripture. Paul's letter, or Revelation, or James, or even the Gospels, would have been received more like a sermon or a commentary or a teaching not as sacred scripture. Sacred scripture would have been Jewish, what we call the Old Testament. So our story this morning might have come originally from a lectionary. Which might have indicated its original placement in something like the Gospel According to Luke. Or might have indicated that it was taken from some Gospel which no longer exists. And the very thought of that is humbling. To think about what has been lost. There is so much that we don't know.

It would seem from the evidence that there was a single individual at some point who inserted this story into John's gospel, and his choice entered into the chain of transmission, and by sheer luck was caught up into Saint Jerome's translation, and from there became nearly universally accepted in the Catholic west, reaching into Martin Luther's German Bible and the most dominant and influential Bible of all time, the King James Version of 1604. And I'm grateful to that individual for having the audacity to do that, in the fifth century of the common era. Even though now, 1500 years later, it's pretty clear to anyone who takes a look at the evidence, that he did it— or maybe *she* did it— but it certainly wasn't the author of the fourth gospel whom we call John who put it there. But if hadn't been put there by this anonymous individual, it surely would have been lost forever.

You can draw your own conclusion. [1] Is the story a complete fabrication, a blasphemy, an insult to God and to the truth? Does this undermine your faith in the Bible? [2] Or, is this a tantalizing clue that there is much more to Jesus than even the Bible tells us, perhaps other gospels lost in the sands of time. – That, in the words of John himself, “*There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*” [3] Or perhaps you trust, as I do, that the Holy Spirit inspires the creation of the Bible. And that not only in the writing of the Bible, but in all of the copying and the translating, in all the ancient technology of recycled papyrus and scroll and codex, that in the work of translation, that in lectionaries and in ancient citations, and

in Gutenberg's invention of movable type, and in shepherd boys going into caves near the Dead Sea and in the 20th century discovering scrolls that are older than anything that I just named... Perhaps the Holy Spirit is living and breathing and guiding us. To something like this story, a story in which Jesus speaks powerfully to me, and certainly to many others, ultimately bringing me to the knowledge of God.

Oh when the saints go marching in, I want to be in that number. I want to meet the individual who found this story and found a way to share it with me. I'd also like to meet John and ask him if he is upset about it, or if he likes the addition to his original words. For now, I trust the work of the Holy Spirit. Who has brought me to a God who is compassionate and merciful. Who urges me to go forward on my way and sin no more. Amen.